

Information Sharing in Professional Associations: the case of the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development in Strengthening the Ethiopian Public Health Association

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The Ethiopia Public Health Association (EPHA) was established in 1989 and legally registered under the Ethiopian law in 1991, with the objective of attaining an optimal standard of health for the people of Ethiopia by promoting better health services to the public and high professional standards through advocacy, active involvement and networking. EPHA is committed to improve the health and wellbeing of Ethiopians through the dedicated and active involvement of its members and in collaboration with all stakeholders. As stated in its constitution, establishing forums for promoting communication among members and the public on health and health-related matters; and advancing research in public health and publishing scientific journals, newsletters and bulletins for disseminating the results for the advancement of knowledge and excellence in public health practice are the prominent objectives of the Association (1).

Over the past twenty five years the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development (EJHD) is published regularly initially twice and later three times a year by the Addis Ababa University School of Public Health, formerly Department of Community Health. In due consideration of the prominent objectives stated in its constitution, EPHA signed a memorandum of agreement in late 1991 with the then Department of Community Health. Through a mutual understanding and consent by both parties, the memorandum of agreement was signed to facilitate the sponsorship, publication and distribution of EJHD. In the memorandum of agreement each party took distinct roles and responsibilities which helped the regular publication and distribution of EJHD.

Since January 1992 EPHA is working closely with Addis Ababa University School of Public Health in the production and distribution of the Ethiopian Journal of Health Development (EJHD) which is used as one of its scholarly publications. All articles published in the Journal, including editorials, represent the opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Ethiopian Public Health Association, the Editorial Board of the Journal or the institution with which the authors are affiliated, unless this is clearly specified. The publication expenses were financially supported by the Ethiopian Public Health Association, the then Ethiopian Science and Technology Commission (through a grant from SIDA/SAREC), Addis Ababa University and currently by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through EPHA/CDC Cooperative Agreement for improving HIV/AIDS/STI/TB related

public health practice and service delivery using PEPFAR funding. In addition to the administrative and financial management of the Journal, EPHA regularly assigns two of its Executive Board members in the Editorial Board of the EJHD.

The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development is one of the major gears EPHA operates to execute its strategic objectives through the publication of peer-reviewed original articles on the broad field of public health. Although there is no organized database which indicates how far EPHA members are contributing in the publication of their research articles in the Journal, a rough estimate indicates that most authors in the Journal are members of the Association. As an input to the Journal, EPHA encourages and supports, both financially and technically, its members in conducting scientific research using resources at its disposal from different project activities. Although there is no detailed documentation to date, large numbers of the scientific researches supported by EPHA for the completion of MPH programs are published in EJHD. Once regular publications are produced, EPHA distributes some 1,700 copies to **all its active** individual and institutional members; to all partner organizations at federal and regional levels through mail using its member database. It also distributes over 2,000 copies during its annual conferences. In its second strategic planning exercise in 2005 (2), EPHA identified information-sharing to members and others as one of its weaknesses and acted accordingly by opening a library with an internet access and developed the Association's web page (www.etpha.org). In both the library and the web page link, members and others can easily access the EJHD electronically or through hard copies.

In order to improve the quality of publications and their distribution, EPHA did a rapid assessment during its 18th Annual Public Health Conference (October 9-11, 2007) which enabled the Association to find out how members view the EJHD and other publications (3). Though there were many more participants during the conference, 103 attendees participated in completing the simple questionnaire developed for the purpose. Almost all the participants (99%) were members of EPHA, about 57.7% from Addis Ababa and 90.9% health professionals.

In accordance with the information gathered from conference participants and as shown in Table-1, the overall satisfaction with EJHD, within the range of excellent and very good, was over 80%. A very

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significant proportion of the participants reported that The Ethiopian Journal of Health Development is accurate in its information, easy to understand, provides relevant and complete information, and has great printing and layout quality. A very large proportion (90.0%) of the participants appreciated the Journal's easiness for

understanding. The distribution strategy and its timeliness were considered as satisfactory and poor in 19.4% and 12.5% of participants respectively. Among the challenges related to the distribution and coverage of the Journal is the frequent change of addresses by EPHA members.

Table 1: Percentage of Conference attendants by their level of satisfaction with EJHD, October 2007

No	Standard of Measurements	Grading scale in valid percentage (N=103)				
		Excellent	V. Good	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
1	Accuracy of information	48.5	36.4	11.1	3.0	1.0
2	Ease of Understanding	48.0	42.0	5.0	3.0	2.0
3	Relevance of information	51.6	34.7	10.5	1.1	2.1
4	Completeness of information	43.5	38.0	14.1	3.3	1.1
5	Printing and layout quality	38.8	41.8	13.3	5.1	1.0
6	Timeliness	26.0	38.5	22.9	8.3	4.2
7	Distribution Strategy	28.6	29.6	22.4	13.3	6.1
8	Over all satisfaction	33.0	47.4	12.4	6.2	1.0

This brief assessment done by EPHA indicates that there is need to improve the timeliness and the distribution strategy for EJHD in order to increase the level of satisfaction by members and others using the Journal. In relation to distribution of the Journal during conferences, participants identified shortage of copies due to its distribution to all attendants including non-members. Another comment provided during the brief assessment was by contributors to the Journal on the delay of the review process for their contribution in the form of original articles. Procedurally, the articles are reviewed by scientific reviewers who serve on voluntary bases, which makes it a bit difficult for the editorial team to force these volunteers to submit the reviewed articles on time.

In order to improve the quality of the Journal and the satisfaction of its users, there is need to improve the different shortcomings raised during the brief assessment. Among the different improvements needed, identifying better and innovative distribution strategies through consultation with members, increasing the number of copies available for conference participants, and introduction of systems to speed up the review process of articles - including compensation for voluntary time - should be considered by both the School of Public Health and EPHA. In identifying the level of satisfaction of users the editorial office of EJHD needs to do reader surveys from time to time and improve the Journal accordingly. In line with this, EPHA is in the planning phase to conduct a nationwide assessment to systematically investigate the reach and utility of its publications. EJHD will be one of the publications to be assessed.

In a recent memorandum of agreement reached between EPHA and AAU School of Public Health (4), it was agreed that the EJHD would be recognized, on its front page, as *“Joint Scholarly Publication of the Ethiopian Public Health Association and School of Public Health, Addis Ababa University”*. In future volumes of the Journal, EPHA will have dedicated pages where members can get and share information on different issues related to the Association.

EPHA will continue its support to the EJHD and use the results of its planned nationwide assessment on the reach and utility of the Journal and other publications, and feedback from its members during annual conferences and other consultative meetings to strengthen the utilization of the Journal in the advancement of knowledge and excellence in public health. In realizing this, EPHA invites all members to use the Association dedicated pages in the EJHD as mechanism of sharing information and providing feedbacks for the improvement of the Journal.

References

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